

## In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80

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## Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

*In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80*, by Robert G. Athearn. Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978. pp. xii, 338. \$14.00.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century the Great Plains region of the United States frequently was referred to as the Great American Desert. Travelers, journalists, and soldiers alike reported the area to be infested with hostile inhabitants and dominated by an inhospitable climate. Temporarily interrupted by the Civil War, the westward thrust of Americans continued. Land speculators, railroad propagandists, and local governmental agents encouraged this movement as they united in denouncing the desert concept and in praising the agricultural opportunities.

These plains states and territories, particularly Kansas, long had been accustomed to the arrival of European immigrants. But with the close of the Reconstruction era and the "redemption" of the former Confederate states, a sudden and disorganized domestic migration developed as thousands of southern blacks responded to the lure of a new life, free land, and political participation which was offered in the developing regions of the frontier. Robert G. Athearn examined this unique phenomenon as it exploded in 1879 and 1880.

These former slaves, the "Exodusters," had a variety of reasons for their flight from various areas of the South to Kansas. There were wide-spread rumors of a promised land, where not only free land, agricultural implements, and mules were waiting

for all, but also political and societal acceptance was proffered. Many blacks feared a massive reenslavement program by southern whites based upon the denial of political privileges and the establishment of economic dependencies. Thus the underlying reason for the movement was a desire to better one's condition.

So they came. Hundreds sold their meager worldly possessions and journeyed up the Mississippi River to St. Louis where they waited for deliverance to the prairie Canaan. The citizenry of St. Louis, fearful of the large numbers and alarmed at the destitute conditions, responded in a charitable manner—funds were raised to fulfill the desires of these poor black Americans by transporting them to their western haven—Kansas.

With scholarly attention to detail and meticulous care for continuity, Athearn chronicles this mass migration. By using primary sources, such as personal letters, official correspondence, governmental investigative reports, and newspapers, he examines the ultimate motives for this movement, describes those who promoted it, and illustrates who profited from the situation. A principal asset of *In Search of Canaan* is its objectivity. The author diligently balances his work by not only telling of the migrants and their impact upon Kansas, but also by depicting the effects this movement had upon the South's economy and upon the nation's political balance. Charges of vested interest were rampant. Northern Democrats accused Republicans of encouraging black emigration from the South in order to entrench Republican strongholds and create new ones. Republicans responded by claiming that blacks were oppressed by "Confederate brigands" and should move freely as they so desired. Some southerners argued "good riddance," while others feared a "bloody shirt" conspiracy to destroy the South's source of cheap labor.

Almost as quickly as it had occurred, however, the exodus faded and died. Kansas did not prove to be a western Eden, and the flight there was a general failure. Perhaps the immediate failures of those who rushed into the area discouraged others from coming. Even with free land, a certain amount of capital was necessary to homestead in a new region. Athearn also reveals that these black migrants were culturally gregarious; be-

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fore long, those who had ventured out to live on an isolated farm retreated to the small towns.

The Exodusters quickly faded from public attention as they were absorbed into the Kansas scene or moved on to neighboring states. Some returned to their former homes in the South. A few succeeded economically; but for the most part, it was a time of displeasure and suffering. *In Search of Canaan* vividly depicts this unusual occurrence in American history.

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*Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*, by Calvin Martin. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. pp. xi, 226. \$10.95.

The fur trade has been a central element in the North American frontier experience. For Frederick Jackson Turner the fur trader and hunter was part of the "procession of civilization" that marched relentlessly from east to west. The Indian served as key figure in this economic relationship (at times a partnership); an alliance with social, cultural, diplomatic, and political overtones.

Most frontier scholars agree that the fur trade proved disastrous for the natives involved. It created severe cultural disruption and often physical dislocation. Except for the Rocky Mountains where few participated, the Indian was the most important cause in the near extinction of many furbearing animals. This traditional view portrays Indians as immediately recognizing the utilitarian superiority of European tools and weapons and, with them in hand, joining in an orgy of destruction. What transpires from this approach is the "notion of a technologically incompetent, uninspired aborigine who was transformed into a highly efficient agent of wildlife destruction once he became equipped with a lethal technology and gained access to the European marketplace."

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